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## How to deepen relationships with your customers

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"Life is relationships; the rest is just details," author Gary Smalley said.

Still, business relationships can be difficult to develop, maintain and grow. Frustration can mount when others build a relationship with a buyer that shuns your attempts, and fear and doubt grip the seller who loses an account despite having a "great relationship."

Consider these steps to help illuminate the complexity of selling relationships, and to assess your own.

• **First, consider how critical is the likability factor — friendliness and the ability to engage others— during initial interactions.**

It's the ability to put yourself into another's shoes, be empathetic and connect quickly, with authenticity. Likability paves the way to opening opportunities and moving them forward. Hone your likability factor by focusing on others and listening. Ask questions about them, their jobs, companies, opinions or anything else related to them.

We like characters in movies, books and new acquaintances that make favorable first impressions. Likability is less important for one-of-a-kind, one-time low-value sales, or highly differentiated products that are high in demand. Likability will open doors, but usually isn't enough to close a high-value, long or complex sale.

• **Rapport — a French word that means to "offer back" — also is important.** It's described as being in sync, in harmony or on the same wavelength.

It typically occurs on a subconscious level. It's being comfortable with someone, and also occurs when you have a commonality of perspective or experience, such as being from the same school, city or other shared experience.

Build rapport with stealth by matching and mirroring body language, tonality or even using the same vocabulary as the buyer. Communication styles range from succinct and direct, expressive, calm and reserved to more factual and detail-oriented. Adjust your approach accordingly, but be careful not to mimic.

Rapport is being like others, and people tend to like people who are like themselves, and are more likely to buy. Having rapport is colossal, but rapport alone does not guarantee trust, credibility or sales success.

• **Bonding refers to a deeper relationship than likability or rapport, because it becomes more personal.** Bonding is a mutual process involving strong, positive emotions between two people.

Shared events outside of business often trigger a closer bond. Interpersonal relationships with feelings of attachment are hard to break. An extreme example would be the bond between parents and children, or the closest of friends.

When buyers develop bonds with vendors, they are difficult to break. They have concern for each other.

In the boomer generation, many bonds developed after business relationships were in place. However, there are anecdotal reports that Generations X and Y frequently bond first before doing business together.

• **Trust is the most critical and desirable component in any sales relationship.** It takes time, and many components go into developing a trusting sales relationship. To gain credibility, any information shared must prove to be accurate, and personal actions must be congruent with words.

Character is also important, and is a reflection of values that reveal themselves over time. A buyer also must perceive that a potential vendor is capable of delivering solutions offered. A child jumping into the arms of a parent, or placing one's life in the hands of a surgeon are examples of trusting relationships.

Fourth-century Athenians appreciated the art and the need for persuasion in their democracy and the value of trust. They talked about "ethos," their word for the appeal of the speaker's authority, credibility and character.

When one vendor compromises trust, the next vendor will have to work harder to gain it. Too many sellers assume an easy sale when competitors fall short. Smart sellers know that trust is paramount and harder to gain when current vendors make mistakes. Proposals and low-price offers without some level of trust rarely are effective when replacing a problem vendor.

One prime way to start relationships with new decision makers who lack time is through a personal referral or introduction by someone else they already trust. The second way is by timing your initial contact when your market intelligence validates they are hurting

significantly with problems you can solve.

Few would dispute the difficulty of selling without some level of relationship, and all levels must include respect and clear communication. There's no one approach to move rapport and likability to a deeper level, nor do all buyers want that to happen. It's advantageous when it does occur.

Start by assessing where you are now with each of your major prospects, and strategize how to deepen the relationship one step at a time.

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